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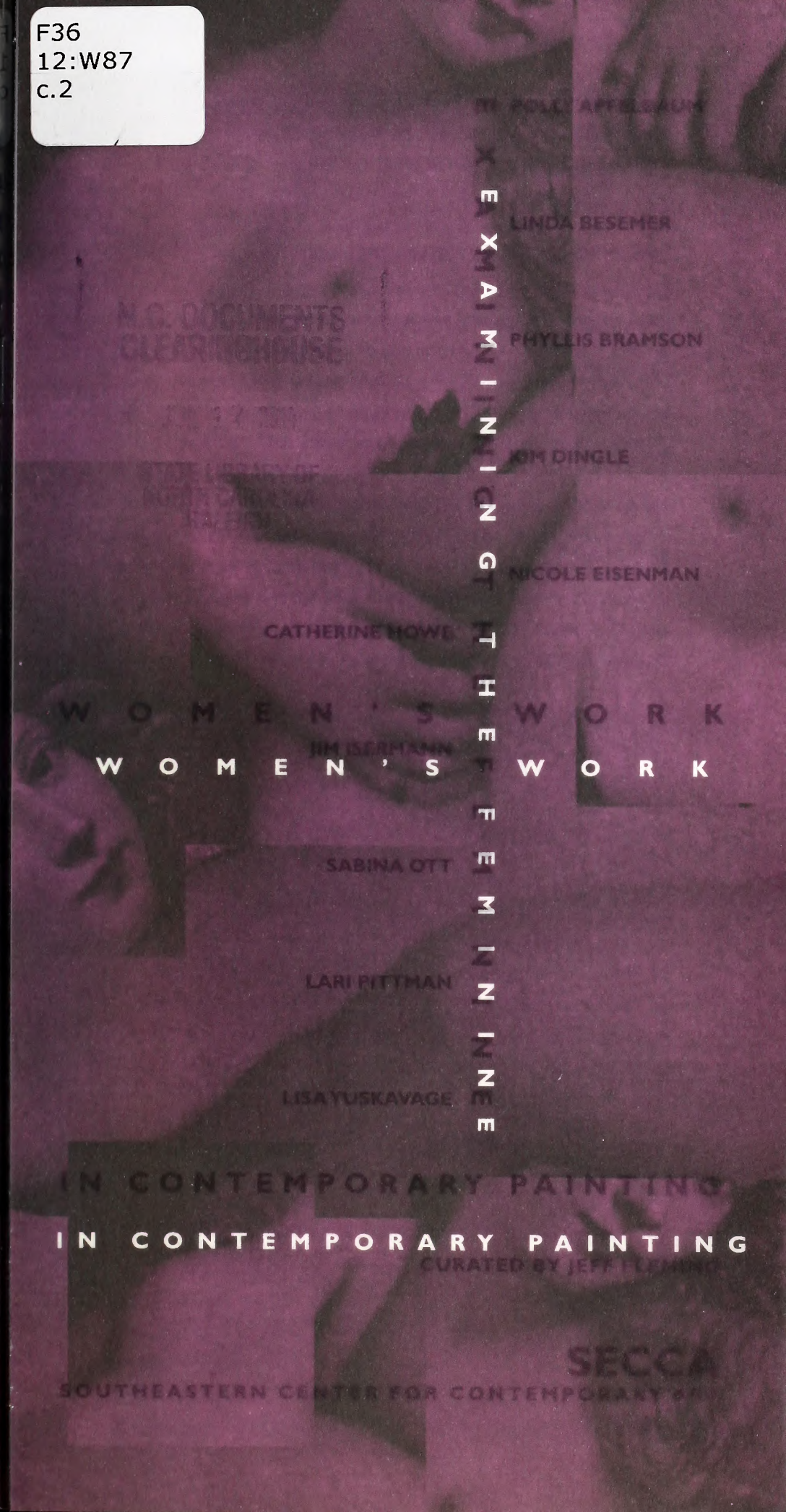

WOMEN'S WORK

EXAMINING THE FEMININE IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

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POLLY APFELBAUM

LINDA BESEMER

PHYLLIS BRAMSON

KIM DINGLE

NICOLE EISENMAN

CATHERINE HOWE

WOMEN'S WORK

JIM ISERMANN

SABINA OTT

LARI PITTMAN

LISA YUSKAVAGE

IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

CURATED BY JEFF FLEMING

SECCA

SOUTHEASTERN CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

WOMEN'S WORK

EXAMINING THE FEMININE IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

July 19–September 30, 1997

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– JF

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Photo Credits: Boesky & Callery Fine Arts, p. 3; Jack Tilton Gallery, pp. 4 & 10; Catherine Howe, p. 5; Jay Gorney Modern Art, p. 6; Phyllis Kind Gallery, p. 7; Polly Apfelbaum, p. 8; and Feature, p. 9.

Cover: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538

The varied life experiences produced by gender differences inevitably influence the creation of art. Traditionally, painting has been the domain of white male artists and has been critiqued from a male perspective. In the late 1960s, however, simultaneous with the feminist engagement of society, women artists began to face off against modernist art movements established, perpetuated, and dominated by white men. The results, both provocative and rewarding, have been changes in the way we look at, think about, and make art. Painting now includes a female voice.

Women's Work examines the contributions of feminine critical thought to contemporary painting. The exhibit does not attempt to define feminist art. Instead, it examines the strategies of feminist activism as presented and explored through the medium of painting.

Feminism or the *feminine* is defined here as "of women" or "about women" and also as a way of thinking that allows for participation

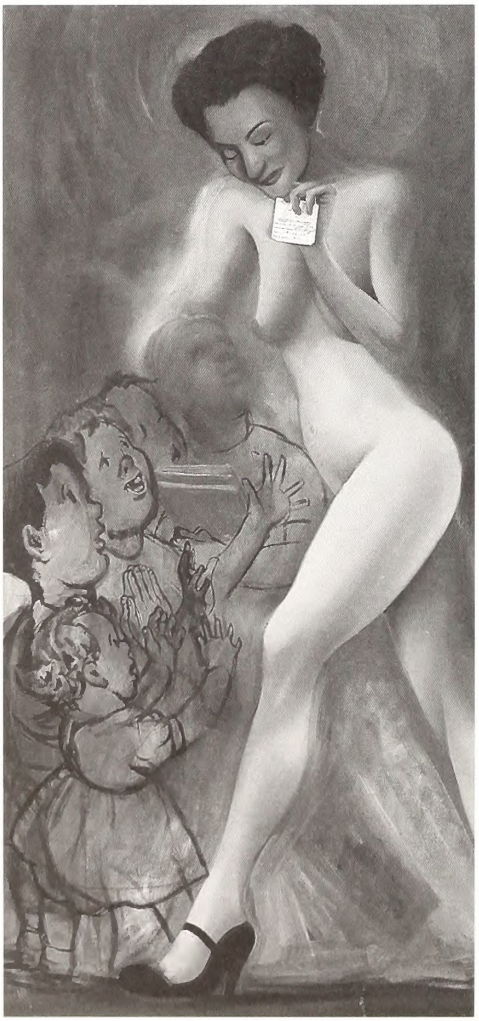
LISA YUSKAVAGE
Big Blonde Squatting, 1994, oil on linen

and acceptance of difference. The demand for the acknowledgment of difference runs parallel to and has informed postmodernist thought, which has questioned the authority of the modernist, male-dominated system. In postmodernist discourse, the demand for the acknowledgment of difference emanates not only from women, but also from persons of color, gays and lesbians, and those of differing social and

economic positions – all of whom have pressured the system to embrace those on its margins as equals.

Women's Work deals with women's issues and experience, but it is also inclusive. The artists in this exhibition, both male and female, are participants in the second generation of feminist inquiry. Building on the accomplishments of trailblazing artists who have worked from a woman's point of view, such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Hannah Wilke, and Eleanor Antin, this second generation of artists embraces strategies that are anarchistic and ultimately subversive. The artists in this exhibition question the assumptions of the modernist movement and the very definitions of the terms we use to describe and experience the art object. The women artists speak from the subjective position of lived experience, often to a female audience. The male artists adopt the strategies employed by the feminist movement to combat the authority of established structures of criticism, representation, and the marketplace.

Women's Work looks at three elements of contemporary painting that reflect the influence of feminine thought and methodology to subvert the established male perspective. The artists here use humor and the carnivalesque, embrace pleasure, both visual and sexual, and acknowledge feminine stereotypes through materials and techniques.



NICOLE EISENMAN
Angel of the Late Pass, 1996,
oil on canvas

Feminist artists use humor as an act of rebellion. Humor is a strategic device that draws attention away from the norm and allows the artist to evade the constraints of society. The artists in this exhibition use both humor and the carnivalesque as strategies for tearing down authority and abandoning established modes of conduct.

Humor and the carnivalesque create a realm of freedom. In this realm, the rowdy female can run amok, displaying her femininity and becoming the temptress and the object of man's desires. Responding to historical representations of the female as a sexual monster and the catalyst for the fall

of man, the use of the carnivalesque addresses the repressed guilt associated with the female body and sex. These artists revel in and take possession of the representations of women.[1]

Kim Dingle, Nicole Eisenman, Catherine Howe, and Lisa Yuskavage all use humor and the carnivalesque as ways of addressing the serious subject of rebellion against the established mores of society. Dingle paints marauding adolescent girls in dainty white dresses engaged in combat or strangling pets. In *prisspapers: smeary brown babies* (1994) and *prisspapers: babies with mashed duck* (1994), wallpaper, innocent and sentimental, like that found in a young girl's room, serves as the background for the carnival. Dingle inverts the traditional roles of men and women, positioning the female as the aggressor. She depicts the girls as uninhibited and violent, ignoring society's codes of conduct.

Like Dingle, Nicole Eisenman also mocks the traditional role of women. In her often sexually charged works, women fight and overpower men, capture positions of power, or taunt the viewer. Humor is paramount. As Eisenman says, "The advantage of humor is that it shifts the focus onto what you're laughing at. When you laugh at something that's tragic you have to ask yourself why you're laughing. Then you can learn something about the issue and about yourself."[2]

Catherine Howe paints portraits of women, often African-American, in the stereotypical studio genre. Purposely romantic and infused with emotion, painted with their seductive technique and extravagant color, Howe's portraits border on the sentimental. The subjects are nude or half-nude, appear shy and demure, and could easily be perceived as

CATHERINE HOWE
Untitled (silver bucket), 1997, oil on canvas

traditional objects of male sexual desire. But Howe transforms the female body from an "instrument through which society's standards of propriety, appearance, and behavior are expressed" [3] to an instrument of power. Like Dingle and Eisenman, she reverses the stereotypical situation. In her psychological dramas, the girls look back at the viewer, staring down the stereotype and questioning the viewer's role.

Lisa Yuskavage's images of women also exaggerate the stereotype of woman as the object of male desire. Like Howe, Yuskavage uses this approach to question the traditional male perception, and then throws it back at the viewer for interrogation. She exposes the stereotype, as in *Big Blonde Squatting*, 1994, then mocks it, and along the way it loses its ability to demean. In Yuskavage's paintings, the male perspective is no longer a valid avenue of empowerment.

Lari Pittman participates in the carnivalesque. With their multiple layers of images, his raucous paintings are themselves carnivals. Images from popular culture mingle with references to gay sexuality to catapult the viewer into chaos. Because Pittman derives his work from subjective experience, it is profoundly human. Like the other artists included here, Pittman is not content to reside on the margins of society. Pittman wants more than acceptance from the center; he wants the center to expand until he can be included. [4]

The artists of *Women's Work* confess both sexual and visual pleasure in contemporary painting. The works in this exhibition display a sexual consciousness targeted, in part, to a female audience. But the pleasure to be found here is more than sexual. It derives also from tactile and

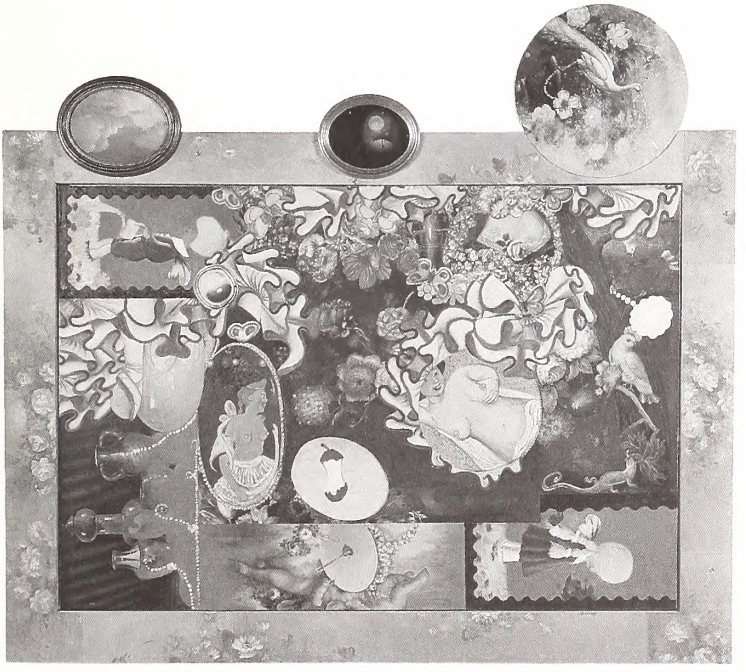
LARI PITTMAN
Ennobled and Needy, 1992, acrylic and enamel on mahogany

visual sensation. The artists included here stress the seductive quality of paint as a medium as well as notions of beauty. In the 1970s, female artists typically avoided the decorative and the sensual, but in the 1990s, both male and female artists have embraced them.

A sexual consciousness is apparent in the work of Phyllis Bramson, Eisenman, Howe, Pittman, Yuskavage, and Sabina Ott. Bramson "sets up a sexualized connection between [her] paintings and the viewer."[5] She achieves this connection through her use of consciously erotic decorative motifs, which often employ stereotyped images of women, elaborately decorated frames, and extravagant displays of flowers. Eisenman, Howe, Pittman, and Yuskavage work with libidinous images, both fantastic and commonplace, to question the integrity and politeness of mainstream (male) sexuality.

Sensual references to feminine sexuality are also a theme of Sabina Ott's abstract works, which are part sculpture and part painting. Ott pours encaustic and paint onto plywood and then carves into the surface to expose previous layers. Ott is concerned with notions of beauty, with presenting a female vision, and with creating a site for personal exploration. The rose is a recurring motif. In the series *Mater Rosa* and *Sub-Rosa*, Ott uses the rose to refer to the feminine, to flesh, to youth, pleasure, and desire. Like many of the artists in this exhibition, Ott humanizes the painting medium, heightening emotive impact.

Female artists working in the modernist era made every effort to eradicate feminine stereotypes in their work and to avoid references to gender that might demean their art. The artists included in *Women's*



PHYLLIS BRAMSON
Lure, 1996, mixed media on canvas and wood

Work take the opposite tack: Many of the artists here embrace feminizing elements – even celebrate them – and they acknowledge the potential of the feminine experience.

Thus, a striking feature of the works in *Women's Work* is the use of gender-specific stereotypes as a means of exposing and changing the very structure that has traditionally exploited difference. The artists here explore materials in relationship to the feminine and present "inscriptions of the feminine . . . in confliet with a phallocentric system." [6] Several works in the exhibition display what has been defined as "an eloquent silence," a lightness or delicacy often attributed to feminine enterprises.[7] The decorative, traditional craft techniques and materials found here both acknowledge feminine stereotypes and enlarge the boundaries of fine or high art.

Polly Apfelbaum, Jim Isermann, Linda Besemer, Ott, and Pittman employ "inscriptions of the feminine" in their work. In Apfelbaum's *Spill*, 1993, the stained velvet cloth suggests household activities – the traditional definition of women's work – as well as menstruation, thus referencing the female body. The components of the work are "fallen paintings," existing somewhere between sculpture and painting. [8]

By combining craft, painting, and sculpture, both Apfelbaum and Jim Isermann emphasize the subjectivity of lived experience and humanize the art experience. Stressing craftsmanship, material, and the

POLLY APFELBAUM
Spill 1993, velvet and dye

decorative, Jim Isermann's laborious, handwoven works reference traditional, feminine enterprises to validate and celebrate what has been defined culturally as female. Presented in a painterly format, Isermann's weavings reevaluate abstraction by merging high and low art forms into a nonhierarchical structure.

Linda Besemer's works examine the traditional format of the male-dominated territory of abstraction. Merging painting and sculpture, she pours and manipulates paint onto a glass surface, removes it after it dries, and then hangs it on a rod. Detached from the wall and without visible support, Besemer's paintings, such as *Fold #4*, 1996, do not attempt to "pass" as male, modernist abstraction, or "pass" as female, the historically subordinate identity.[9] Instead, they neutralize forms and processes that signify gender.

JIM ISERMANN
Untitled (0495), 1995, hand-loomed cotton

Women's Work acknowledges that feminine thought is subjective, changing, and not regulated to a single biological gender. Feminism has moved from its first generation's desire to create an equitable system to a second generation's demand for systemic change and acceptance of difference.

This exhibition acknowledges that the feminist movement has moved beyond its gender-based origins to become a way of living. "Feminism" now encompasses a range of inclusive ideologies that are not necessarily rooted in gender differences. *Women's Work* bears witness to the way feminist thought has expanded the contemporary canon to include more

than the male experience, to include difference. The resulting exaggeration and emphasis of the margins of society, often manifested in extremes of representation and sexual conduct, is ultimately an act of subversion.

JEFF FLEMING, *Chief Curator*

1. For a larger discussion of the use of humor and the carnivalesque see Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

2. *Nicole Eisenman quoted* in *Art in America*, June 1994.

3. Marcia Tucker, "The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies," in *Bad Girls* (Cambridge, Mass.: The New Museum and MIT Press, 1994), 35.

4. For an overview of Pittman's career to date, see Howard Fox, "Joyful Noise: The Art of Lari Pittman," in *Lari Pittman* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996), 9–22.

5. Phyllis Bramson, Artist Statement.

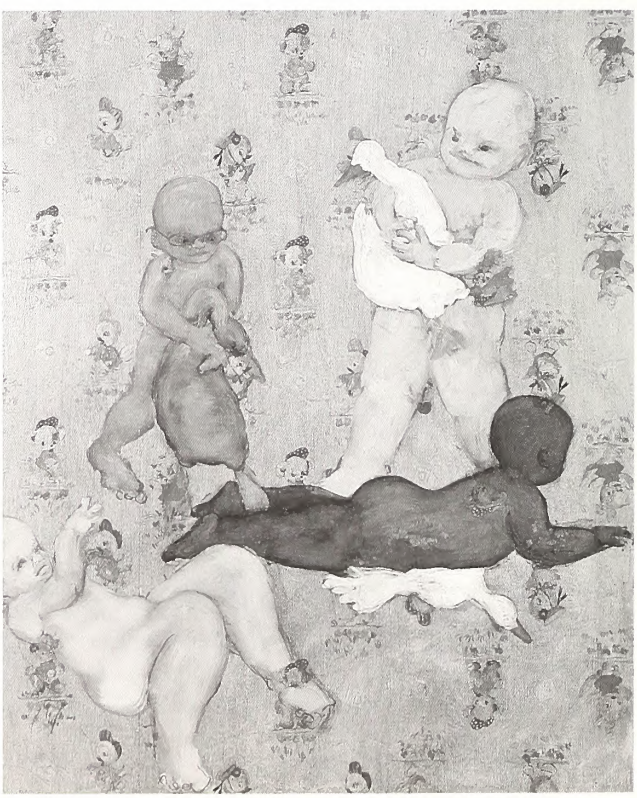
6. Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art: In, of, and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 74.

7. Andrea K. Scott, "An Eloquent Silence," *Tema Celeste*, Autumn 1992, 80–83.

8. Lynn Zelevansky, "Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties," in *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties (New York:* The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 13.

9. Linda Besemer, Artist Statement.

KIM DINGLE
prisspapers: babies with mashed duck, 1994, oil on wallpaper on wood



Polly Apfelbaum

Born 1955, Abington, Pennsylvania. Lives in New York

1. *Spill*, 1992–1993
Velvet, sheeting, and dye. Nine parts, dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Linda Besemer

Born 1957, South Bend, Indiana. Lives in Los Angeles

2. *Fold #4*, 1996
Acrylic, 48 x 60 inches. Collection of Jennifer Steinkamp

3. *Fold #6*, 1997
Acrylic, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Phyllis Bramson

Born 1941, Madison, Wisconsin. Lives in Chicago

4. *Goody Two Shoes*, 1996
Mixed media on canvas and wood, 49 ½ x 68 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York and Chicago

5. *Lure*, 1996
Mixed media on canvas and wood, 76 ½ x 84 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York and Chicago

Kim Dingle

Born 1951, Pomona, California. Lives in Los Angeles

6. *prisspapers: smeary brown babies*, 1994
Oil on wallpaper on wood, 60 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

7. *prisspapers: babies with mashed duck*, 1994
Oil on wallpaper on wood, 60 x 48 inches
Collection of Blake Byrne, Los Angeles

Nicole Eisenman

Born 1963, Verdun, France. Lives in New York

8. *Art Class*, 1994
Ink on paper, 80 x 100 inches
Collection of Rose and Morton Landowne, New York

9. *Angel of the Late Pass*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 70 x 34 inches
Collection of Dean Valentine, Los Angeles

Catherine Howe

Born 1959, Buffalo, New York. Lives in New York

10. *Untitled (silver bucket)*, 1997
Oil on canvas, 66 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Bill Maynes Gallery, New York

11. *Untitled (nosegay)*, 1997
Oil on canvas, 62 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Bill Maynes Gallery, New York

Jim Isermann

Born 1955, Kenosha, Wisconsin. Lives in Santa Monica, California

12. *Untitled (0495)*, 1995
Hand-loomed cotton, 50 x 50 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles, and Feature, New York

13. *Untitled (0995)*, 1995
Hand-loomed cotton, 51 x 53 inches,
Courtesy of the artist, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles, and Feature, New York

Sabina Ott

Born 1955, New York. Lives in St. Louis, Missouri

14. *Mater Rosa #5*, 1991
Oil and encaustic on mahogany panel, 96 x 84 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, California

15. *Sub-Rosa #21*, 1993
Oil and encaustic on mahogany panel, 84 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, California

Lari Pittman

Born 1952, Los Angeles. Lives in Los Angeles

16. *Ennobled and Needy*, 1992
Acrylic and enamel on mahogany panel, 82 x 66 inches
Collection of Arthur G. Rosen, United Yarn Products Company, Inc., Wayne, New Jersey

17. *Transubstantial and Needy*, 1994
Acrylic and enamel on mahogany panel, 82 x 66 inches
Collection of Arthur G. Rosen, United Yarn Products Company, Inc., Wayne, New Jersey

Lisa Yuskavage

Born 1962, Philadelphia. Lives in New York

18. *Big Camille*, 1993
Oil on canvas, 64 x 50 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Boesky & Callery Fine Arts, New York

19. *Big Blonde Squatting*, 1994
Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches
Collection of Yvonne Force, Inc., New York

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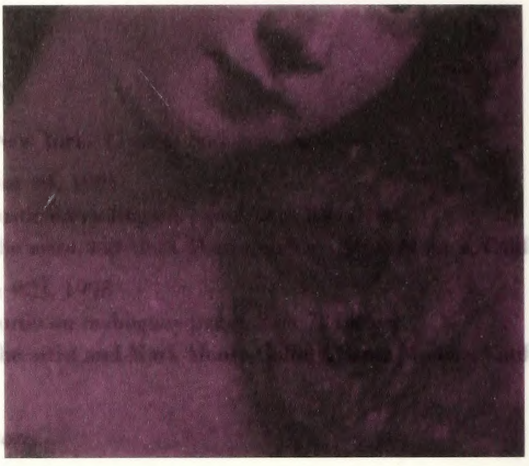

Sabina Ott

Born 1955, New York. [illegible]

14. *Mater Ro*[illegible]
Oil and enca[illegible]
Courtesy of the [illegible] California

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